



Dentally Speaking
by
Jeffrey S. Haddad

Clenching and Grinding Your Teeth at Night: Fact or Fiction?

Have you ever been told you grind your teeth at night? Ever wonder why your dentist is making these claims and you have never had any symptoms or never been told by your significant other that you do? Did they recommend a “night guard” or “occlusal guard” that you didn’t think you really needed? In this month’s issue, I want to dispel any myths out there about the reality of grinding your teeth, also known as bruxism.

It has always surprised me when patients deny that they grind their teeth at night when there is clear evidence of tooth wear and gum recession present.

When your dentist tells you that you grind your teeth, this is not an educated guess, it is a fact. Our goal is to educate you on the situation so that you can take action if you want to. The problem that I see on a daily basis is that people seem to regard teeth grinding and clenching as a

“character flaw,” when in reality the majority of people clench or grind to some degree. Hopefully, I will make all you so-called “grinders” feel better about yourselves, because I am a grinder. That’s right, I have been a severe grinder since my late teens and just like you, I didn’t believe it either.

I was first told I was a clencher/grinder in dental school, but just like most people, I didn’t want to believe I had a problem. I had many symptoms of a grinder (morning headaches and jaw tension, temperature sensitivity throughout the mouth, receding gums), however, I attributed them to other things in life like stress or just being born with “sensitive teeth.”

Then I cracked my first molar. It was only a small hairline fracture that could barely be seen, but when I chewed on it I definitely knew it was there. I finally broke down and made myself an “occlusal guard” to wear at night. Occlusal guards are hard acrylic appliances custom made to fit the teeth and help to prevent any further damage by protecting your teeth. After about 2 weeks of wearing this appliance, something I was NOT looking forward to, I finally realized what true comfort

was. My teeth sensitivity went away, I felt no tension in my jaw or head in the morning, and felt more refreshed then ever!

FICTION: “Why should I get an occlusal guard now? I can always get one later on in life if things get really bad.”

FACT: Occlusal guards do not fix any damage that has been done to the teeth, it is more of a way to prevent any further damage that may be done while clenching and grinding. Dentin, which is the layer of your tooth underneath the enamel, wears 15 times faster than enamel. The sooner you start wearing one, the sooner the destruction of your teeth will be addressed. More importantly, severe grinding can lead to TMJ problems and migraine headaches if untreated.

FICTION: “There is no way I will be able to go to sleep with anything like that in my mouth.”

FACT: Most patients claim they can’t sleep without this night appliance once they realize how much better they feel in the morning and throughout the day. Most grinders do not sleep through the night or even if they do, never feel totally refreshed, despite how many hours

of sleep they get. The reason is that they are in such tension all night, they frequently awake themselves and never get to the important “REM” sleep that the body needs to properly recover.

FICTION: “I will just buy an over-the-counter “boil and bite” guard and it will do the same thing.”

FACT: Although, these guards may be attractive because of the price, these can actually do more harm to you than good. Over the counter guards can make you grind more because they are soft and your brain registers that as food. This increased clenching can give you severe muscle spasms resulting in increased jaw pain and headaches, and sometimes leading to even more extreme TMJ problems.

Jeffrey S. Haddad D.D.S. of Doolin Haddad of Rochester, completed his dental education at the University of Michigan. He is a fellow of the prestigious Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies and lectures nationally on cosmetic dentistry, TMJ disorders, and practice management. For more information, visit www.rochesteradvanceddentistry.com.